

“Almost”.

“Richard, you almost made it.”

Those were the words Uncle Richie kept hearing before being consumed under that unforgiving, blood orange sky. He had left the creaking floorboards of his halfway home that morning in an attempt to once again pay off his final debts. Living on Mister’s land felt like a constantly shrinking cage of mirrors. All around Uncle Richie was distortion, and every day was a new and more confining shard of glass.

But today was a special day, Baby Brother’s birthday, so before dawn could rise beyond the distant mounds, Uncle Richie raced into Mister’s office with the same sun kissed smile he had at the end of every month.

Of course, this time would be no different. Uncle Richie left with the same sluggish drawl of generations before.

“Almost,” he spat out as he headed back to the halfway home for supplies. Almost was a bitter sting in an already tired wound. The word crowded his mouth and crawled back out with vengeance. Almost. Inches away from success, but not quite there.

Uncle Richie was determined to get *there*. There meant no more birthdays with false happiness and broken promises, no more wooden homes laced with frostbite and shared blankets. There meant a single home on his own land, a golden yellow fortress full of kindred spirits and warmth. Almost was not there.

So, he worked. Uncle Richie plowed and planted and sowed seeds in hopes of a garden he knew he would never see. Nonstop, harder than ever before, he heaved and lifted and towered over the field. With whips of sun slashing his back, Uncle Richie refused to rest. Almost as if trying to protect him, ancient weeds from the grassland wrapped themselves around Uncle Richie’s ankles. But still, he worked.

Completely focused on the future where Baby Brother no longer felt the pangs of disappointment, Uncle Richie had not noticed the calls of Mama for him to take a break. From inside their halfway home she hollered for Uncle Richie. Mama stared at the empty envelope that once contained the past year’s savings, and now questioned if splurging for the perfect birthday party was her best decision. She looked at Baby Brother again; his feet dangled as he rocked back and forth in the huge wooden chair, and the shining smile across his lips seemed to lift his head. The simple shotgun house shook as Mama shouted that Baby Brother’s cake was finally finished, and that Uncle Richie best hurry and rest on up in the house.

But Uncle Richie did not hurry and in fact, did not hear Mama’s calls. He simply pushed past his straining muscles and blurring vision and continued to tend to the field. He even ignored the beads of sweat falling from his forehead into his eyes, knowing that resting for even a second meant another month in Mister’s cage and not in his own golden home.

“Almost”.

Tired of waiting, Baby Brother sprinted past the oak doors of halfway home and ran toward the field of cotton surrounding Uncle Richie. Baby Brother laughed, the endless miles of soft southern snow brushing past his dark skin and gently tickling his arms. Finally approaching Uncle Richie, he slowed down with a smile and tirelessly caught his breath.

“Uncle Richie!” Baby Brother shouted with a wide grin and a breathless laugh, “Uncle Richie, come on! We all waiting for you!”

There was a pause. A moment of silence in which Baby Brother simply stared and watched Uncle Richie continue plowing and planting as if the boy was never there. The sun glared behind Uncle Richie and left only a silhouette of his once familiar uncle. The vibrant orange of the sky began to hurt Baby Brother’s eyes. Then finally, just as Baby Brother was beginning to worry, Uncle Richie turned, looked directly at Baby Brother, and slowly came to a stop.

At first, there was excitement. Overwhelming joy consumed Baby Brother, and he could not help but jump as he immediately thought of his first ever birthday cake and finally spending time with Uncle Richie. All he had wanted was time with his uncle, and now he would finally get it.

But then there was stillness. Empty silence as Baby Brother watched Uncle Richie fall while reaching for his open arms. As his limp body plummeted to the ground, Baby Brother stared with frozen hands and a cold heart; blazing sunlight and hazy eyes were all that remained. For what felt like hours, Baby Brother’s legs could not be uprooted and his voice could never be reclaimed. Instead, the little boy stood paralyzed staring at the ants already attacking his uncle’s flesh. Everyone on the tenant heard Mama’s blood curdling screams that soon followed the fall, yet Baby Brother still could not move or utter a word hours after his world ended.

Shortly after, they placed Uncle Richie’s body in the potter’s field with cracked tombstones and poison ivy along the fence. Baby Brother’s only birthday wish that year was that Uncle Richie have a nice place to rest, and this was as nice as it could get.

When dusk crept by, the boy with rooted legs and a snatched throat finally did speak. Amidst the silent chill of a starlit night, Baby Brother asked in a whisper to see where Uncle Richie last fell. Begrudgingly, Mama agreed and quietly wept as they walked back to the same spot from only hours ago.

With freshly wiped tears and a newfound steadied voice, Mama made Baby Brother promise to still love this here garden, Uncle Richie’s garden, even if no flowers were to sprout. She claimed it was the final gift he had to give. “Love it to honor your uncle, Baby. Love it as his last moments before he left us.”

“Almost”.

Reluctantly, Baby Brother accepted the promise. Baby Brother already knew no flowering plants would bloom on this Mississippi ground. He had watched this acrid land deplete the life of everything he loved for years. There was no hope of a future on this scorching, bleeding soil.

So how long? How long would Baby Brother have to remain satisfied with wilted magnolias and dying uncles? How long would he pretend to hope for progress in this standstill life?

The answers felt close, but he could not discover them. Inches away but not quite there. Almost.